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A Marcel Breuer House Project of 1938–1939

BY ISABELLE HYMAN

Marcel Breuer designed a house for a development community in Palm Springs, California in 1938, a year after he emigrated to the United States. The project was never realized, and an interesting house in terms both of Breuer’s career and of the history of transplanted modernism was thereby forfeited. Among the Marcel Breuer Papers preserved at the Syracuse University Library are unpublished sketches, working drawings, correspondence, and specifications which make possible a reconstruction of the Palm Springs house and its program, and furnish new particulars about working procedures in the Gropius-Breuer partnership.*

THE COMMISSION

In the summer of 1938 a letter addressed simply to “Professor Marcel Breuer, Boston, Mass.” found its way to the architect. Breuer had been in this country for just a year, teaching at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design and practicing in partnership with Walter Gropius. The writer, Mrs. David Margolius, was a potential client with an exact program: “Dear Sir”, she began, “Having heard of you in Europe and in the States, I ask you whether you would be interested in drawing plans for a small mod-

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I am equally indebted to the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation for a 1988–89 fellowship. Above all I am indebted to Mrs. Constance L. Breuer for her help, and for her permission to publish material from the Marcel Breuer Papers. Most of the research was carried out in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University, to whose staff, particularly Kathleen Manwaring, I wish to express thanks. I also appreciate the assistance of the staff of the Archives of American Art and Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and in their New York City Regional Office.

Some of this material was presented as a paper on 29 March 1990 at the Fiftieth Anniversary Meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, Boston, and will appear in my forthcoming book on Breuer’s architecture to be published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
ern home in Palm Springs, California. Before I go any further I must tell you that the restrictions call for a one story house, modern Spanish exterior. As my husband and myself want something especially beautiful and outstanding we turn to you."

The "modern Spanish exterior" mentioned by Mrs. Margolius refers to the desired visual character of Las Palmas Estates, the development community in which the house was to be built, and to standards of design formulated by its architectural jury that oversaw plans for houses proposed by individual lot-owners. The importance of Spanish Colonial Revival style in Southern California, where "many communities adopted the style as the only image allowed" is underscored by Gebhard and Winter in their study of the architecture of Los Angeles,2 and is fully borne out by the letter to Breuer.

The summer of 1938 was a productive period for Breuer. In August he wrote to his friend and former collaborator in Zurich, architect Alfred Roth: "I am very busy and feel very good in America".3 He was occupied with exploring possibilities for a variety of industrial designs and with efforts to patent, manufacture, and market his furniture. At the same time in partnership with Walter Gropius he was overseeing the construction of the Hagerty house, a spacious seaside residence in Cohasset, Massachusetts. In June a special exhibition of photographs, models, and drawings of Breuer's work had been installed in Harvard's Robinson Hall and

1. Hilde Margolius (Mrs. David Margolius) to Breuer, 10 August 1938, Marcel Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Library. Unless otherwise indicated, all Breuer correspondence cited hereafter is from the Marcel Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Library.

2. David Gebhard and Robert Winter, Architecture in Los Angeles, a Compleat Guide (Salt Lake City: G. M. Smith, 1985), 486. The authors also point out that "California architects and their clients have never been particularly precise as to what made a dwelling Mediterranean rather than Spanish, though there indeed was a difference" (485). At Las Palmas there seems to have been some flexibility with regard to "style" as long as the design conformed to the neat and orderly appearance of the community (garage doors, for example, were to open away from the principal approach to keep untidiness out of view).

was reviewed in an important essay by Henry-Russell Hitchcock. Breuer was to leave for Mexico City in August to attend, as a delegate, a Congress on Housing and Urban Planning. He was working on furniture designs for Rhoads Hall, a new dormitory at Bryn Mawr College. He and Gropius were planning the interior architecture of the Pennsylvania State Pavilion for the 1939 New York World’s Fair, and they had accepted an invitation to participate in a competition for a Festival Theatre and Fine Arts Center at the College of William and Mary. In June Gropius and Breuer had learned that the design they had been invited to submit to a significant and well-publicized competition for an art center at Wheaton College, sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art and Architectural Forum, had taken only second prize (first prize went to a design by Richard Bennett and Caleb Hornbostel). Two hundred forty-three architects and firms entered the open competition, and four outstanding architects (or partnerships) were invited to participate (Gropius and Breuer, Cambridge; William Lescaze, New York; Lyndon and Smith, Detroit; and Richard Neutra, Los Angeles). Gropius and Breuer had invested in their design high hopes not only for the future of modern architecture on American college campuses, but also for their own careers. In a number of letters that summer Breuer was to describe the result as “depressing”. Writing on 9 June 1938 to Carl Maas, associate editor at House Beautiful, for example, Breuer said, “I was very depressed by the result of the competition, indeed; but we have to face that kind of thing if we go into competitions—and I think we will do it again and again”.


7. Marcel Breuer Papers, Correspondence, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
Despite the demanding activities of his professional life, Breuer was interested in the proposal for a California residence and he responded to it quickly and enthusiastically: “Many thanks for your letter of August 10th and for your confidence asking me for the plans for a small modern home in Palm Springs, Calif. I would be delighted to do that and I would especially like to do a one story house which I think would give great charm to the relations between house and garden.”

The prestige of his appointment to the Harvard faculty and of his partnership with Walter Gropius notwithstanding, the request in 1938 for a California house design from Breuer, relatively unknown in the United States, was unusual. The joint practice was based in New England, and California had its own ample supply of modern architects. The residences undertaken by Gropius and Breuer since their recent arrivals in America had been located only on the East Coast or in Pennsylvania; besides, they were either still under construction or in design, not yet published and certainly not widely known.

The California proposal, however, was the kind of opportunity for building that Breuer had hoped to find in the United States even if the request for a “modern Spanish exterior” suggested a naive understanding of modern architecture on the part of the clients. Although he was in no position to turn down work, in his first response to them Breuer wrote: “I only hope that the ‘Spanish exterior’ isn’t taken too seriously by you. I would much prefer to do my plan independent of any outspoken style except my own feeling about modern aesthetic.” Breuer instructed them (politely) about the “modern aesthetic”, and concluded his remarks by writing: “I think a one story modern house with good relations to the garden, with a possible patio, etc. would look quite naturally rather Spanish even if it is not designed in the Spanish style”.

Within a short time Breuer reached an agreement with the Margoliuses. As he was about to depart for Mexico, he wrote that he

8. Breuer to H. Margolius, 11 August 1938. At this moment the Margoliuses were at a vacation resort in North Carolina.
9. Ibid.
10. Breuer went to Mexico City on 18 August as a delegate to the 16th Interna-
would “work out plans for you on my trip by boat, when I have plenty of time and concentration for that”, and requested a site plan, a detailed program for the house, and “the approximate sum you want to spend for the building itself”. Breuer dined with his clients in New York the evening before he sailed. It was a meeting that betokened the seriousness and enthusiasm of both parties.

Gropius, too, was keen about this job. Within days after Breuer’s departure Gropius sent the Margoliuses the agreement, already signed by Breuer (in New York) and Gropius (in Cambridge), for the drawing up of plans. In his accompanying letter Gropius wrote that “Mr. Breuer reported to me the meeting he had with you . . . regarding a small house to be designed by us for you in Palm Spring[s], California. We like the program for the house as you have outlined it and we shall be glad to provide you with the necessary plans and specifications.” David Margolius added his signature to the contract and returned it to the Gropius-Breuer office on 31 August 1938. He appended a letter with several pages of suggestions and requirements for the house; on the reverse of one of these sheets (fig. 1) Breuer later drew, in his distinctive manner, quick sketches of ground plans and an elevation with patterns of sun and shade, and he worked out preliminary dimensions, square footage, and costs. In its final version his design called for approximately 3000 square feet. In California at that time such a house could be constructed for about five dollars per square foot. Margolius also reported that Breuer had agreed to stop at Palm Springs on his way back from Mexico in order to examine the building site

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and that “Mr. Breuer is going to see Professor Neutra in Los Angeles; maybe he can talk with him about some architect who would be willing to supervise the erection of the building. We talked about that but did not state anything definitely.”

The reference to Richard Neutra suggests it was he who proposed Breuer to the clients. The three architects had been together a few months earlier: in a letter of 11 March 1938 Neutra (“back again at the Pacific”), referring to a recent lecture he gave at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, thanks Breuer for his “friendliness” and says that he is also “just writing to Mr. and Mrs. Gropius”. Possibly in the East at that time to see his recently completed,

15. D. Margolius to Gropius and Breuer, 31 August 1938. Gropius probably forwarded this letter to Breuer, who had it with him in California when he arrived on 14 September. On it Breuer jotted down his figures for the dimensions of the house and a rudimentary groundplan, names and addresses of apartment hotels in Palm Springs, Neutra’s home and office addresses with notes about hours to phone or visit. It appears that he followed Margolius’s suggestion that he confer with Neutra about the selection of a supervising architect.

spectacular house for John Nicholas Brown on Fishers Island, Neutra in Cambridge undoubtedly had visited the Gropius-Breuer office and learned something of their work under construction and still developing.

The invitation to plan the house came directly to Breuer, and it was conceived and designed by him in its entirety. As a result of an agreement with Gropius regarding credits after the dissolution of the joint practice they operated in Cambridge from 1937 to 1941, the house has taken its place in the list of partnership projects. The contract carried both signatures, and Breuer consulted Gropius with regard to the terms of agreement with the supervising architect. Once the project was launched, however, the responsibility for its design was completely in Breuer's hands. The perspective sketches (figs. 2, 3, 4) are penciled in as “Margolius Residence [or House] Breuer” in either the lower or upper right hand corner (fig. 5), and notes to and from Breuer are written over many of the sheets of drawings (fig. 6). All the correspondence regarding the program and the design flows exclusively between Breuer and the client, and between Breuer and the supervising architect. The working drawings were executed and signed (“L.J.C.”) by Leonard J. Currie, at that time draftsman in the Cambridge office.

17. In June Breuer would be invited by Henry-Russell Hitchcock to meet him at Wesleyan University (where Frank Lloyd Wright was to receive an honorary degree) and accompany him to Fishers Island to see the Neutra house. Letters between Breuer and Hitchcock, 4 June 1938 and 6 June 1938.

18. Following a minor error in a Harvard undergraduate thesis on Gropius (David H. Wright, “The Architecture of Walter Gropius”, unpublished Thesis for Honors, Harvard College, April 1950), the project is usually identified incorrectly as the John Margolius house. The only publication of the design before the present study, as far as I know, is the Detroit drawing, identified as “Project: House for John Margoulis” [sic] in Winfried Nerdinger, Walter Gropius (Berlin and Cambridge: Bauhaus-Archiv and Busch-Reisinger Museum, 1985), 271, ill. W110.

19. See p. 64 of this article.

20. Currie, whose distinguished career includes the deanship of the College of Architecture and Art, University of Illinois at Chicago, had been a student of architecture at Harvard and then worked in the Gropius-Breuer office. He also made the drawings for the Hagerty house. Breuer had high regard for Currie,
Fig. 2. Marcel Breuer's Margolius House project. Perspective drawing, southeast, with notes (Marcel Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Library).

Fig. 3. Marcel Breuer's Margolius House project, Perspective drawing, north (Marcel Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Library).

Fig. 4. Marcel Breuer's Margolius House project, Perspective drawing, southeast (Marcel Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Library).
documents bear out the nature of the partnership as it was described by David Wright in his 1950 Harvard thesis on Gropius: “Each artist, working with a draftsman, would be primarily responsible for a given project in most cases, and the contribution of the other partner would vary considerably.”21 In the case of the Mar­golius house the responsibility was fully Breuer’s.

At least one more meeting took place between architect and clients in September 1938, this time in Chicago (their principal residence). Among other matters, the Margoliuses approved the proposal to ask John Porter Clark, a Palm Springs architect whom Breuer had contacted on his visit there, to supervise the construction of the house. Primarily a residential architect, Clark had probably been recommended to Breuer by Neutra.22 Neutra knew the Palm Springs architectural community; in 1937, just a year before Breuer’s project, he had built one of his most admired houses there, for Grace Lewis Miller.23 Breuer set out the terms of agreement in a letter of 28 September to Clark and requested a survey of the site; within a week the agreement was confirmed and the survey ordered.24

As supervising architect, John Porter Clark was an excellent choice. Cornell-trained, California-based, and a few years younger than Breuer, Clark was unreservedly committed to the principles of the international architectural avant-garde. The house he was to build for himself a little later (1940) he described to Breuer as “along the lines of the Kocher and Frey week-end house on Long

about whom he later wrote that he “worked very closely with me during my first years in the United States and [I consider him] one of the most capable designers in America today”. Draft of letter of recommendation 6 July 1955, Marcel Breuer Papers, Correspondence, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

23. Neutra’s first visit to Palm Springs was in 1925, just after he had settled in California. On this and on the Miller House, see Hines, Richard Neutra, 57, 121–24.
24. Breuer to Clark, 28 September 1938; Clark to Breuer, 5 October 1938.

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Island, using corrugated iron as an exterior surfacing”. The so-called “Aluminaire House” near Huntington, Long Island, to which Clark refers was the three-story glazed and terraced cube raised on reed-thin pilotis in the Corbusian manner, first designed

25. Clark to Breuer, 4 April 1940.
in 1930–31 by Lawrence Kocher and Albert Frey as an experiment in mass-produced housing of aluminum construction. Also in 1940 Clark and Frey (who had begun his career in Europe in 1929 as a draftsman for Le Corbusier) were to establish an architectural firm of their own (Clark, Frey, and Chambers) in Palm Springs.

Clark, who admired Breuer’s design for the Margolius house (“your excellent design” he wrote), enthusiastically took on the job of supervising architect. During the project’s initial phase he proved invaluable in his responses to Breuer’s questions, in making practical suggestions, and in providing important information about such things as the California climate, water pressure figures, and local construction practices and building codes that determined the specifications and aspects of the design. For example,

26. The pilotis were of “Duralumin”. The house was designed and built for an exhibition in New York City in April 1931 sponsored by the New York Architectural League and was later (1934) re-erected near Huntington as a summer home for architect Wallace K. Harrison.
Breuer suspected and Clark confirmed that “exterior wooden parts are not very durable in Palm Springs”. 28

Breuer wrote Clark on 19 October 1938 that “[I have] just finished all my sketches”. 29 After a delay related to the completion of the property purchase, 30 he sent the clients two ½” scale drawings and four perspective sketches on 10 November. Towards the end of his accompanying letter he broke the news: “The only thing I am afraid of is that we will be unable to build the house for $12,000” (the original budget). Based on the Margolius’s program his estimate was $15,000 or $16,000. 31 He gave them little recourse, saying that “I really do not know how to simplify the plan because I think you need the space and number of rooms that the plan contains. . . . I think it would be a mistake to cut down on the main features.” 32 He closed the letter with a half-hearted suggestion: “One possibility would be to eliminate the greenhouse and shop, with the overhanging roof of the terrace, entirely. It would be a pity, but I should be glad if you will consider this possibility.” 33

In an undated letter received by Breuer on 8 December 1938, Mrs. Margolius requested that he proceed with the working drawings. Accordingly, they were begun the next day, 34 and six weeks later, on 20 January 1939, he posted to California three sets of working drawings and short-form specifications. 35 As the project evolved, the clients chose to eliminate (or, as they thought at that point, to “postpone”) the greenhouse wing, the single economy Breuer had allowed himself to recommend. The design continued to develop steadily and rapidly for four months until, as the consequence of a personal crisis in the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Margolius, in April 1939 it came to an abrupt and unexpected halt.

28. Clark to Breuer, 16 January 1939. Mrs. Margolius, too, was satisfied with the choice of the supervising architect: in a letter of 7 February 1939 she wrote Breuer that “Mr. Clark has been a big help”. 29. Breuer to Clark, 19 October 1938. 30. H. Margolius to Breuer, 7 November 1939. 31. Breuer to H. Margolius, 10 November 1938. 32. Ibid. 33. Ibid. 34. Breuer to H. Margolius, 9 December 1938. 35. Breuer to H. Margolius, 20 January 1939.
A Palm Springs newspaper carrying the story headlined it as “Resort Millionaire Sued for Divorce”. Breuer had in fact accurately assessed the financial capacity of his clients when he laid out the features and dimensions of the house according to the program that they had submitted. When Clark sent Breuer this clipping, he wrote drolly in the margin: “This probably would not have happened if he had proceeded with the building of his house”. While that is debatable at best, what is not at issue is that a house, interesting in terms of Breuer’s American career and as an early example of transplanted modernism, was forfeited. However, among the Marcel Breuer Papers at Syracuse University Library are thirty-three sketches and working drawings, short-form specifications, corre-

36. Clark to Breuer, 5 June 1939.
37. See pp. 82–84 of this article. This list accounts for 35 sketches and drawings that came to Syracuse from Breuer’s files (included are a topographical map and a drawing from the Yorke Safe and Lock Company for a wall safe requested by the clients). The Syracuse drawings do not represent the complete set since three remained with Gropius at Harvard: in his thesis on Gropius (see footnote no. 18) David Wright made observations from a working drawing (elevations) dated 12-23-38, only a copy of which is in Syracuse, and from a working drawing
spondence, and other unpublished material sources from which a little-known early Breuer house can be added to the catalogue of émigré architecture in America.

The design for the Margolius house was set down by Breuer quickly and with assurance, and from every square foot of space he extracted the maximum amount of comfort and rational livability. Perspectives and elevations (figs. 2, 3, 4, 12, 13) depict a one-story winged body of flat-roofed cubic blocks, without (apart from the covered porch) “elementarist” extrusions such as balconies, pergolas, overhangs, or sunscreens. Minimalist precedents of European early modernism were augmented by Breuer’s creative use of materials and by the idiosyncratic patterns of layout and circulation that always made his residential interiors complex and interesting. The house had none of the glamorous terracing and fully-glazed transparent planes that characterized Neutra’s structures, nor did it include the easy internal-external interpenetrations of other modern California houses of the period. Breuer did produce, however, a subtle response to the “contextual” requirements of the original proposal. By shaping the exterior margins and corners not with the sharply creased angles of modernism, but with slightly softened, barely rounded edges (figs. 12, 13), he sent out faint resonances of adobe construction. Along with the unpretentious aspect of the

dated 1-18-39, of which neither the original nor a copy is in Syracuse. Also among the Gropius papers in the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University but not in Syracuse, is a groundplan redrawn for publication by Leonard J. Currie and dated 7-26-40 (fig. 15). I have not yet identified the publication for which it was destined.

I am grateful to Emily Norris of the Busch-Reisinger Museum for her assistance, and to architects Laurie Maurer and Stanley Maurer for their help with the reading of the working drawings.

Because the originals are drafted in light pencil, the details may be difficult to make out; for extra clarity the reader is directed to the redrawn plans of figures 14 and 15.

38. Architect Stanley Maurer called this feature to my attention on the elevation drawings. It was noted also by David Wright, Gropius, 43. The homespun nature of adobe construction was upgraded here by the sophisticated device of a half flue tile covered with stucco for the coping of the sun deck. To insure the success of flat-roofed houses Breuer paid a great deal of attention to roof coping
Fig. 9. Marcel Breuer's Margolius House project (revised), site and roof plan, drawing #4, 1-19-39 (Marcel Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Library).  

house, its low massing, color accents made by hollow terra cotta tile (in the wall of the drying yard), in the opaque white stucco surfaces, those softened perimeters curved to a very small radius were all that was needed to effect what Breuer had predicted even before he put pencil to paper—that “the house would look quite naturally rather Spanish”. The successful fulfillment of the requirements of Las Palmas Estates is documented by Clark's letter of 15 December 1938: “Dear Mr. Breuer, I have submitted your excellent design for the Margolius House and obtained approval from the architectural jury. . . . I am very happy to have the plans passed by a conservative jury in a tract consisting solely of traditional houses.”

**THE HOUSE**

During the months of planning that preceded the abrupt and un-

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foreseen termination of the project, Breuer and Clark had invested in it substantial energy and ingenuity. For Clark it was an opportunity to work with a design he respected from the atelier of the most prestigious architectural émigrés of the period. For Breuer it offered a stimulating challenge in a new country, and an opportunity to use the modern Mediterranean villa features he had favored in the past, but this time in an appropriate climate with almost year-round suitability, instead of chilly northern locations such as Zurich, Wiesbaden, Sussex, and seaside Cohasset. An important aspect of the planning process for Breuer, therefore, was a series of solar studies to track patterns of sun and shade in different seasons and times of day. He limited the fenestration and the mural glass, and he welcomed Clark’s suggestions about window placement for the purpose of enhancing cross ventilation. Neither direct reception of the sun’s heat through large surfaces of glass nor expansive outdoor terracing were objectives in this, his first warm-climate house in an era before air-conditioning became a requisite feature in domestic architecture. He called for an exterior transparent wall only in the dining area, which was adjacent to a shaded terrace, and at the shel-
tered front entrance. Even apart from the matter of sun control, Breuer used fully glazed walls with great restraint. His views are made known in a letter (to another client) of 21 April 1939, advising against such a feature: “I must repeat my objection against the room which you would obtain this way, which would be I feel, not desirable at all, but something between a swimming pool and a showcase. (See worst examples of modern glass architecture).”

Plans and elevations (see list below) for the Palm Springs house show a longitudinal organization (precursor of the “long house” genre to which some of Breuer’s later residences would be assigned) with the major axis stretching north-south within the principal living block from which the two asymmetrical wings extend. These units form a lucid arrangement of collocated volumes representative of the best of Breuer’s houses: living spaces and a patio in the main block; a terrace-loggia/greenhouse/workshop with roof deck-sleeping porch in the south wing; to the north a walled drying yard, servants space, laundry, and garage.

Many of Breuer’s ideas for modern house design found their way into this Palm Springs project. Avoiding a traditional and predictable classical formula with its “announcement” of the main portal, he placed the entrance (fig. 3) not in the center of the long flank of the living block, but instead on the shorter north facade. It was obscurely nested within an alcove and reached by a ramp rising from the curving and perforated garden wall that surrounded the property (figs. 3, 7). Such an undramatic, underplayed entrance was basic to Breuer’s design “philosophy” not only for houses of this period, but also for his later work (the entrance to the monumental 1956–57 Staehelin Residence in Feldmeilen, near Zurich, is almost hidden). In a statement prepared for a section on modern American architecture in the April 1940 issue of House and Garden Breuer, speaking in the “humanistic” language of the American architectural press of that era, declared that behind the new architecture was a new generation with a desire for an informal and healthier life, and “that is why the orientation of [a] house towards the sun is

thoroughly studied; that is why the entrance is the least open and not the most representative; that is why the garden and the private views are more characteristic, the partition walls movable or replaced by curtains, and the furniture as much a part of the architecture as the walls”.41

Breuer liked a creative variety of textures and unpretentious materials that blended aesthetically while maintaining a strong individual character. In the Margolius house he called for hollow terra cotta wall tiles, wood, painted stucco, painted plywood, painted

41. *House and Garden*, April 1940, 47. Regarding Breuer’s statement about “the least open” entrances, a quarter of a century later when many early modernist principles of design, and the architecture of Marcel Breuer particularly, were under heavy attack, Catherine Bauer Wurster in a Modern Architecture Symposium at Columbia University in May 1964 spoke of the ways in which 1930s German minimum standards in house design found their way into American examples. She cited Breuer’s Hagerty house at Cohasset (she thought it to be mostly by Gropius) saying that “it has one of the meanest entrances of any house I have ever been in . . . no house by . . . any Bay Region architect was ever that inhospitable”. See *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 24 (1965): 51.
concrete, painted steel pipe, and granite flagstones. By adding to these workaday substances such devices as Breuer-designed built-in furniture, interior plant beds, sliding glass skylight, greenhouse, and sleeping porch/roof terrace, he enriched the house to an almost luxurious degree of comfort.

The entrance at Palm Springs opened to a gallery that was neither living space nor vestibule but an indoor patio. The “experience” of the house began in the forty-eight feet of this granite-paved longitudinal atrium-courtyard that separated the areas for service and for living. Ingeniously roofed with a sliding glass skylight (and skylight screen) of approximately 9‘ x 23‘ through which the stars or clouds would be visible and light and air would enter, the patio became at once internal and exterior space, both private and public. Breuer imagined the skylight remaining open most of the time, making the room principally a protected outdoor area: there is “the possibility of closing it, in case of bad weather, or at night”, he wrote to Mrs. Margolius; the specifications called for securing its pavement with waterproof mortar. Concerned about the construction of the manually operated skylight, he arranged to have its steel framework built in Everett, Massachusetts, by the Knowlton Iron Works Company, then knocked down, marked for assembly, and shipped to Palm Springs, where the glass would be added. Shop drawings were prepared by Knowlton for a frame (with a 3” pitch, presumably for water to drain off) with ball bearing tacks on rails operated by a rope through a sheave.

Walls and ceiling in the patio were surfaced with stucco painted white, the floor paved with random gray slabs of granite into which plant beds (water pipes specified) were inserted. Free-standing “semi-transparent” cedar grills concealed the doors to the kitchen on one side and coat room and guest bath on the other, and simultaneously intercepted a view into the house from outside. At night, floor reflectors would throw shadows of the plants across the walls. As he stretched this patio ten feet beyond the rooms aligned on the

42. Breuer to H. Margolius, 10 November 1938.
43. Breuer to Clark, 25 January 1939; letters of 29 November 1938 and 7 January 1939 from Knowlton Iron Works Co. to Breuer. Blueprints of the shop drawings are with the Breuer Papers in Syracuse.
east, Breuer transformed it into a small foyer-bar that met the living room at a transparent glass wall into which was set at the request of the clients a glazed door that was threshold-less so as not to break the continuity.44

Breuer’s interpretation of the patio as transitional courtyard between public path and living space is one of the subtle ways in which he bore in mind the original injunction to design a “Spanish” house without compromising his commitment to style-less European modernism: he had proposed, we remember, that “a one story modern house . . . with . . . patio would look quite naturally rather Spanish”. By means of traditional accessories of courtyard architecture found in Latin regions—open roof, stone paving, plantings and water—Breuer suggested a place that was both public reception area and indoor garden. The genesis of his patio format can be traced to his 1936 Gane Pavilion in Bristol with its flagstone terrace partially roofed by an open-beamed pergola, a combination

44. The patio to foyer-bar sequence was at the clients’ request.
that appears to have been translated into the skylighted and granite-paved patio in California two years later.

In setting out her program Mrs. Margolius wrote that the “bedrooms should be accessible without entering the living room”. This accounts for the unexpected location—near the entrance—of two bedrooms and a study open to the living room, the latter a large area screened from a dining room that could either extend the living space or be independent. “The idea is to have a transparent connection between the patio, the living room, and the study, so as to have the space of these rooms flowing together, thereby increasing, in impression, the dimensions of these rooms”, wrote Breuer to Hilde Margolius.45 He contrasted the enclosed bedrooms to the open volumes of patio, study, and living room expanded and united by long diagonal views through transparent planes and across space.

The area for dining was a modest 10’ x 14’ but Breuer merged it with the living room on one side and, through a glass wall, the terrace-loggia on the other. To divide the living and dining areas, he contrived a floor-to-ceiling pivoting partition of painted plywood, slightly curved, 3½” thick and separated from floor and ceiling by a half inch. This may have been a unique design feature for an American house of the period; it had been used in modern Eu-

45. Breuer to H. Margolius, 28 November 1938.
The area for dining in Mies's Tugendhat House (1928–30), for example, was delineated by the famous stationary curve of ebony veneer. Breuer himself in his “House for a Sportsman”, a sports club designed for the 1931 Berlin Bauhausausstellung, used a folding partition. In 1936, the year before he left London for the United States, he devised what he called a “pivoting wall” as a backdrop for fashion photos in his interior for Motley’s Fashion Studio. Also in 1936 he would have known the houses Berthold Lubetkin built for himself and for Dr. Ida Mann at Whipsnade, Bedfordshire, in which the dining room was defined by a parabolic screen. Probably Lubetkin’s source, as well as everyone else’s, was the curved wall of the dining room (designed in 1927) in Le Corbusier’s Villa Stein/de Monzie. When Breuer’s mobile partition for the Margolius House was in position A, recorded in working drawings 1 and 5 (figs. 7, 8), it was a gentle arc that played against the angles and flat surfaces of the room and separated but did not isolate living and dining spaces; swung into position B, it united them in maximum spatial extension and at the same time screened the pantry door. And it provided formal or intimate alternatives for dining as illustrated by the furniture configurations in the preliminary sketches (fig. 7).

The south wing “narthex” (figs. 2, 4) was a covered, granite-paved, elevated terrace reached on two sides by steps from the garden. Some of the most interesting features of the house—ultimately sacrificed to economy—are to be found here. They include a clerestoried workshop beneath a roof deck, and a greenhouse, the glazed facade of which formed the west wall of the terrace and was a verdant counterpart to the plant-bedded patio. The terrace was bordered on the long dimension by a parapet wall with four standard steel pipe columns (3 ½” in diameter and painted white) and


47. Mrs. Margolius was enthusiastic about this feature of the design: “[I am] really delighted with the revolving screen. . . . I think it makes the dining room really cozy.” H. Margolius to Breuer, 28 November 1938.
partly sheltered by the roof they supported.48 The format of a single story house terrace overspread by a projecting roof with columns first appeared in Breuer’s work with the Berlin exhibition House for a Sportsman where the roof covered a wide “training terrace”. Within a decade after the device appeared in the Palm Springs sketches it evolved into the great pierced cantilever rising above the terrace of the 1946–47 Robinson House in Williamstown, Massachusetts—one of Breuer’s most acclaimed residences.

Breuer’s letter of 10 November 1938 to Mrs. Margolius, estimating construction costs, projected the area of the house to be about 2900 square feet; its volumes, without the covered terrace, service yard, and sleeping porch were to measure about 30,000 cubic feet. Breuer was ingenious in eliciting the sensation of copious space in this building of modest size with his long diagonal sight lines, interior transparencies, and the supplemental roof deck. After the bids had come in discouragingly high,49 causing the clients to postpone the construction of the south wing, Breuer had the groundplan redrawn in order to eliminate everything on the south except for the colonnaded terrace (fig. 9). To protect the now-exposed west, he invented a vertical grill of cypress finished with shellac and wax, a device that pleased Mrs. Margolius.50 Not willing to abandon such an agreeable element as a roof deck even to cut back the cost, Breuer relocated it above the kitchen, where it was to be reached (for outdoor dining as well as recreation and sleeping) by a stair near the kitchen’s back door. Ever since Le Corbusier decreed the rooftop solarium to be a life-enhancing ingredient, it had become a requisite feature of modern villa architecture in Europe. In no way reserved for the enlightened bourgeoisie, roof decks were adopted

48. The original specifications called for lally columns, but Clark wrote to Breuer (29 December 1938) that “they are practically unknown in this section and would probably involve greater expense”. Breuer followed Clark’s advice on this as he did on many other matters concerning use and availability of materials.

49. Breuer to H. Margolius, 10 November 1938. The bids from three builders came in at $17,995, $17,345, and $15,973. Clark to Breuer, 18 February 1939.

50. “I think you found an ideal solution.” H. Margolius to Breuer, 8 December 1938.
Fig. 14. Detroit Steel Products Company, plan and sketch of Marcel Breuer’s Margolius House project (Bauhaus-Archiv, Berlin).

for low-cost housing developments such as that at Pessac and the Weissenhof Siedlung at Stuttgart. At about the same time (ca. 1926–27) in Southern California the two Europeans Schindler and Neutra developed a highly sophisticated version of this feature
in their houses for the physical-culture authority, Phillip Lovell. The roof deck had already been assimilated by Breuer into some of his earliest architectural projects in Europe, for example the 1925 low-cost prefabricated *Kleinmetallhaus* with its partially covered solarium.

While much of the design of the Margolius house was a continuation of modes developed by Breuer in Europe—a neutral, flat-roofed, cubic encasement of volumes generated by a plan of great ingenuity and originality—its woodframe structure was essentially American. It was one of the best examples of Breuer’s early interest, first recorded by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, in the application of historical American light wooden construction to modern design.51 Set above a concrete foundation, the framing was to be made of joists and 2 x 4 vertical studs between larger (4 x 4 and 4 x 6) posts of Douglas fir, with diagonal braces let into the studs. Some walls (terrace and roof-deck parapets) were of concrete reinforced with metal. The specifications also called for surfaces to be finished outside and inside with white-painted stucco. The modernist aesthetic of the house as discrete white object still dominated, and in this instance the effect was appropriate to climate and location. Currie even drew some tall cacti as background in the perspectives (fig. 4).

The California house was among the earliest of Breuer’s woodframe buildings (the Harnischmacher house and Doldertal flats had been constructed with steel frame and reinforced concrete; the Gane Pavilion was supported by bearing walls of masonry). Just before leaving England in the summer of 1937, Breuer had devised, in his unexecuted project for a ski resort hotel in Obergurgl, Austria, an original system of framing patterns with truss-like forms very close to those for Palm Springs. He sent out to California many sheets of carefully wrought drawings for elevation and roof framing (figs. 10, 11) attesting to his command of wood construction techniques.

Breuer had begun his sketches for the Margolius house in December 1938 and by late April 1939 the project was dead. Both he and Clark were deeply disappointed. To Hilde Margolius, Breuer

wrote: “I was greatly attached to these plans and hoped to see the house executed”.\(^52\) Had it been built, his Palm Springs house would have been a residence of unassuming but confident character, its volumes closed and inner-directed, its coherent plan organized with freshness and originality, suited in scale, in program, and in materials to its owners and to its location on a rather small lot in a well-to-do development community in the California desert.

**POSTSCRIPT**

In January 1941 the project was briefly resurrected. The Gropius-Breuer office received a letter from Detroit Steel Products Company (manufacturers of Fenestra windows) asking if there might be available “a set of small-house plans you’d be willing to sell us for, say, $50?”\(^53\) For promotional purposes they intended to have “a competent architectural delineator” make a perspective of the

\(^52\) Breuer to H. Margolius, 28 April 1939.
\(^53\) Detroit Steel Products Co. to Breuer, 21 January 1941.
house and a detail of one of its windows. The windows would be “Fenestra Steel Residence Casements, irrespective of what type or make of windows were shown in the plans”.

Breuer answered the letter and Gropius initialed the carbon copy. The dormant plans of the Palm Springs project seemed appropriate, and the fee was not unwelcome. “We would be glad to furnish you with the plans of a house designed for Palm Springs, California”, Breuer wrote. “It is understood . . . that the perspectives, etc. which you intend to have drawn up, will be checked by us as to the true presentation of the house or to details.” When Breuer received the perspectives he chose to ignore the suggestion to substitute Fenestra casements for the original windows. Instead he furnished the company with a new and modern window design. “May I call your attention to the window divisions?” he began, and pointed out that the windows in the original design combined one or two vents and a fixed panel without vertical partitions. “This window solution is one of the characteristics of the design and we would appreciate it very much if you would revise the rendering . . . removing the vertical bars except where they are necessary for the vents.” Breuer’s enduring interest in the design and mechanics of fenestration led to astute inventions in his residential and institutional buildings. In this case, to make certain that his formula for the Margolius window not be compromised, he “gave” it to Detroit Steel Products Company. “We believe that this arrangement of windows represents a perfectly feasible and desirable possibility for Fenestra as the fixed panel may also be supplied by you”, he wrote. The drawings were revised and Detroit wrote that they hoped “this will prove more in keeping with your design”. The new drawing was almost correct: “[It] is now satisfactory indeed with the exception of the extreme right window”, Breuer responded. “It gives the impression of being a so-called corner win-

54. Ibid.
55. Breuer to Detroit Steel Products Co., 29 January 1941.
56. Breuer to Detroit Steel Products Co., 26 March 1941. Breuer’s window design is included with the sketches and drawings for the house.
57. Ibid.
58. Detroit Steel Products Co. to Breuer, 2 April 1941.
dow, which it isn’t. You will note in the elevation that the thickness of the wall is shown at this corner. I imagine this correction can very easily be made.”

Breuer took exception to one additional feature of Detroit’s original drawing: “You will note that the perspective shows a much too high parapet wall under the windows in the east as well as the south elevation. This should be changed, and the hedges shown under the east windows and on both sides of the steps to the terrace should be removed as they are not the intention of our design.”

Detroit Steel Products Company made all the requested changes, Breuer gave his approval to the revised drawing, and eventually it was published as an advertisement for Fenestra Windows (fig. 14). By insisting on adjustments in the drawing until it remained more rather than less true to his design, he transformed Detroit’s version of the house from hedge-accented “American suburban” to unencumbered modern. Although the “artistic” foliage and the shadow-washed surfaces that remained in the Detroit drawing removed the adobe-modernist house from its desert resort “context”, it has been the only representation of Marcel Breuer’s 1938–39 Palm Springs design until this publication of the Syracuse material.

Following are sketches and working drawings for the Margolius House project, 1938–39 in the Marcel Breuer Papers, Syracuse University Library:

- Perspective southeast; “Margolius House Breuer” on lower right.
- Perspective southeast; bird’s-eye view, with notes; “Margolius House Breuer” on upper right.
- Perspective north; “Margolius Residence Breuer” on lower right.

59. Breuer to Detroit Steel Products Co., 7 April 1941.
60. Breuer to Detroit Steel Products Co., 26 March 1941.
61. But now see an important new work: Joachim Driller, Marcel Breuer, Das Architektonische Frühwerk bis 1950, Dissertation for the University of Freiburg, 1990, which appeared after this article was submitted for publication in the Courier.
Perspective of north entrance; east elevation, with sketches and calculations; ¼” = 1’. “Margolius Residence Breuer” on lower right.

Two rudimentary perspectives of north entrance; “Margolius Residence Breuer” on upper right.

Perspective of south wing after revision (elimination of greenhouse/shop); “Margolius Residence Breuer” on lower right.

Groundplan with Breuer’s original layout (later revised).

Groundplan; east elevation, notes and figures; “Margolius Residence Breuer” on lower right.

Groundplan; “suggestion (alteration 28.11.38)” in Breuer’s handwriting; “Margolius Residence Breuer” on lower right.

Groundplan, with dimensions; “Margolius Residence Breuer” on lower right.

Groundplan, with figures; “Margolius Residence Breuer” on lower right.

North elevation; ¼” = 1’; “Margolius Residence Breuer” lower right.

Fenestration for living room, part casement, part fixed; designed by Breuer; “Margolius Residence Breuer” on upper right.

Roof framing and lally columns for south wing; “Margolius Residence Breuer” on lower right.

“Sun patterns at solstice: 2 P.M. (3 P.M. daylight time); June 21; 3 P.M. (4 P.M. daylight time), summer sun; 2 P.M. December 21; winter sun; 11 A.M. December 21; winter sun.”

Section with patterns (degrees) of sun and shadow at “11:00 A.M. (12 n. daylight), June 21; 2 P.M. December 21; 11 A.M. Dec. 21.”

Electrical plan layout, with notes to Breuer; “Margolius Residence Breuer” on upper right.

Section of revolving partition for living room-dining area, 3” = 1’; elevation of revolving partition, ¼” = 1’; linen room shelf details, 1” = 1’; broom closet details, 1” = 1’; “Margolius Residence Breuer” on lower right.

Topographical map for Las Palmas Estates marked “void”.

Shop drawing for wall safe from Yorke Safe and Lock Company.
NUMBERED WORKING DRAWINGS

#1. “Prelim. sketches”; \( \frac{3}{8}'' = 1' \); 10-17-38.

#2. “Prelim. sketches”; \( \frac{3}{8}'' = 1' \); 10-17-38.

#3. Site plan, marked “void”, replaced by working drawing #4.

#4. Site and roof plan “replacing drawing #3 site plan”; \( \frac{1}{8}'' = 1' \); 1-19-39.

#5. Floor plan; \( \frac{1}{4}'' = 1' \); 12-31-38.


#7. Foundation plan; \( \frac{1}{4}'' = 1' \); 1-19-39.

#8. First floor framing; \( \frac{1}{4}'' = 1' \); 1-19-39.


#10. Elevation framing; \( \frac{1}{4}'' = 1' \); 1-17-39.

#11. Wall section; \( 3'' = 1' \); 1-5-39.

#12. Wall sections including section at skylight; \( 3'' = 1' \); 1-5-39.

#13. Door schedule; \( \frac{1}{2}'' = 1' \); 1-20-39.

#14. Details; \( 3'' = 1' \); 1-26-39.